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[untitled]

Tom Dreyer

Panel: An Age of Migration, Diaspora, Exile

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## Tom Dreyer

This presentation has many titles. The first and most impressive is *Writing for an Age of Migration, Diaspora, Exile*, which sounds appropriately grand and should preferably be read with an accent, something British but not quite, something that belongs to India or Jamaica or South Africa, or any of the other places where the British chose to do those things they did so well.

The second title is *Not Our Leguaan*, which, though invitingly cryptic, is problematic because not many people know what a 'leguaan' actually is. Let me end your suspense. It is a kind of giant African iguana which has a very long and powerful tail. On this last point I am particularly clear, because once a leguaan, that had by some strange magic found its way into the engine compartment of my friend's car, gave me an almighty wallop with it, leaving an interesting welt across my face, that lasted for weeks and that I used to impress girls with at parties.

The car was a 1972 Opel Ascona that my friend had lovingly restored to its former glory, and used to impress girls with at parties.

The relevance of the third title *See You in Cyberspace* should become clear in due course, as will that of the next: *Into the Void*.

The fifth and sixth titles are *Smily Face* and :-) respectively, but the less said about them the better.

But I digress.

Perhaps I should start by saying that the story of South Africa has always been one of exile and diaspora. Ours is a country peopled by migrants, and has been for as long as anyone cares to remember. The first inhabitants were the San, the Bushmen, descended from pygmy stock that had once dwelt in the forests of central Africa, but had been pushed southward by pressure from other tribes who were themselves migrating in this direction. Wave after wave of migration followed and by 1500 AD the ancestors of the Zulu, Xhosa and Swazi occupied most of the northern and eastern parts of what would later become South Africa. This interesting situation become even more interesting (if you will excuse so innocuous a term) when my forefathers, the Dutch, arrived on the scene in 1652. They were, of course, also migrants, driven by economics, wanderlust and by the irresistible lure of the East. It is a sad and often overlooked little fact that Jan van Riebeeck, the commander of the first victualling station at the Cape, our Christopher Columbus if you'd like, had no taste for this place whatsoever. Jan, whose bad hairstyle graced our bills and postage stamps in the days of my youth, had been recalled from Tongking in Vietnam for some nefarious dealings and sent to South Africa as punishment. Well, Jan served his time and then high-tailed it back to the East. The Cape was nothing more than a way station after all, a temporary stopover for voyagers, migrants and exiles en route to other destinations.

It seems fitting that the first written literature ever produced in this country were the messages that passing sea captains would leave for other ships, placing them under so-called postal stones. One of these stones is on display in a shopping centre not far from where I live, near a hair salon that churns out coifs in no way similar to that thing old Jan chose to wear above his face.

But I digress.

The world being what it is, the settlement at the Cape, conceived as nothing more than a kind of supply depot, soon grew into something different, into the first stirrings of a country, its ranks swelled by wave after wave of migrants. They included the French Huguenots who fled religious persecution in their homeland, slaves that had been brought from Madagascar, India and East Asia as if they were no more than so many heads of cattle, and the English settlers of 1820. These guys, one has to say, had simply been suckered. In 1806, after the interesting Battle of Blouberg, the British had taken over the Cape, and then proceeded to convince many of their countrymen to take up farms on the eastern frontier of the colony, along the Great Fish river, where the Xhosa from the north and the colonists from the south were coming into contact for the first time – with results that were of course, extremely interesting.

I am an Afrikaans writer. I write in a language that is Dutch but not Dutch, European but not European, African but not African - even though it is the only language named after this (or any other) continent. I write in a language that has little to do with tulips, windmills or silly snowmen with carrot noses, a language honed to denote Africa in all its harshness, cruelty and beauty. 'Aardvark', 'veld' and 'wildebeest' - these are the words that Afrikaans has given to the world. As is 'trek,' of course: to migrate, to get going, to yield to the fever of the horizon. Yes, in the language of the Enterprise, to boldly go where no man has gone before. I write in Afrikaans, a language of wanderers and migrants, of 'trekkers,' who trekked rather than submitting to British rule, who trekked again when the British occupied Natal in turn, who kept on doggedly trekking as the Free State and Transvaal and all the other dreams fell to the juggernaut of Empire. And finally, just when the smoke of war was clearing, just when it seemed that things were finally looking up, just when it seemed that there would be no need of further trekking, these migrants, these god-fearing people who had given the world 'boer' and 'spoor' and 'commando' and 'puff-adder', embarked on their final and most ambitious journey. Inventing the word 'apartheid', they proceeded to trek away from sanity and even from reality itself.

And this thing, this big A, this abomination that strung barbed wire between us and the only country we ever knew or loved, has made migrants of us all. How can we forget the freedom fighters, forced into exile or into that other kind of exile from which there can be no return? How can we forget the men and women who had to flee to fight another day, or the activists, harried by the security police (whose tactics were of course always extremely interesting)? And how could we forget the writers who had to abandon everything, to escape persecution or hardship or any hint of kinship with these bastards who were turning the country into a parody of all they had ever dreamt of or believed. But we shouldn't forget the silent majority either, those who stayed behind, those who suffered in a country that was becoming more and more like a foreign country every day. They were the migrant workers with their passes designating them as temporary sojourners in the country of their birth. They were the vagrants and the dispossessed, but also those who retreated into a kind of inner exile, a moral stupor where the sky was still as blue as it was on TV, where the doves sang exclusively in verse, never mentioning the shacks and the barricades or the obscene whirring of rubber bullets. There were the English too, lest we forget, who had had the savvy not to give their policies a name, and were now torn between memories of Home and this strange new republic which they supported as eagerly as anyone else who were allowed to draw their crosses - though this has become an inconvenient truth of late, a kind of non-fact, something that will hopefully go away if no one mentions it again. And always there were the cruel and haunted Afrikaners, the beautiful, deluded Afrikaners, these men and women who came up with names like 'meerkat' and 'boomslang' and 'berg', but loved this country more than words could express, and still managed to turn it into a stranger.

But times change, of course. Thank God they do. And the more they change, the more they stay the same. Having listened to the above, none of you will be surprised to hear that today we South Africans are as restless as ever. The reasons are manifold: in part they are the reasons luring all people to Europe and America: the euro, the pound and the almighty dollar. But in part they are political, because history, as we all know, moves in circles.

In the last ten years South Africa has witnessed an unprecedented wave of emigration, to Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, mostly, but not exclusively, by young, white, well-educated people. Some estimates put the figure as high as 1 million - a massive number, a diaspora in fact, if one keeps in mind that there *were* only 6 million white people in 1997 (and by white people, incidentally, I mean the kind of people who were classified as 'White' by the immoral classification systems of the past, and who are now asked to fill in their race as 'White' on the forms of the grandiose affirmative action machinery that has restored our national obsession with race to its former glory).

And if, at the airport, or at one of those farewell parties, which are all the same and where no amount of "Give 'em hells" or cheap bubbly can mask the emptiness gnawing at everybody's heart, you ask your friends why they're leaving, you get the same answer every time. Career opportunities, they'd say, or crime, or the futures of their children. But then their voices will choke and their eyes stray to the sun beating down outside the terminal building, or to the night sky with its Southern Cross, that strange sextant they'd first learned to read on some forgotten night, so long ago now, when it was still safe to stand outside in the dark. And later, when the whisky has been drunk and the bubbly has lost its fizz, they will tell you of their alienation, of their sense of not belonging, of being exiles in their own country - the kind of disjunction JM Coetzee (who, incidentally, emigrated to Australia recently) portrays so vividly in his novel Disgrace.

But nothing has brought this feeling, this plaint of the exile, this lament of the fool wrongfooted by history, home to me quite as forcefully as did an email I received shortly after arriving here in Iowa City. It was from a friend of mine, from Stef, whom I'd know all my life. He told me, in a meandering prose that belied his background in computer programming, that he and his wife had decided to emigrate to Australia - the pay is good there, he said, and computers work the same, don't they. "And besides," he had added in a comment that was meant to be flippant, but had gripped my heart and is gripping it still. "I'm a foreigner already, I can just as well go be a foreigner somewhere else."

So, goodbye, my friend. Goodbye, Stef. I won't be joining you—not yet at any rate—but I wish you well. At least the Southern Cross will be the same when you look up at night. At least the water will swirl in the accustomed direction when you wash your face at the basin, trying not to look at yourself in the mirror and wonder who the hell you are. And who knows, perhaps you and old JM might even bump into one another one sunny Adelaide morning. Perhaps you two could sit on a park bench and talk for a little while, about how remarkably white the cockatoos were as they flew past from some place you had never heard of, to some place you had never seen. Perhaps you could talk about how punctually the busses ran, or how lovely the scent was of those yellow flowers whose name escaped you for the moment. Perhaps neither of you would mention the way the waves used to break on the white rocks at Llandudno or those primeval sunsets from Lion's Head or the incomparable thrill of finding a porcupine quill in your garden in the morning (a small pact between yourself and the world, a small token saying that for the time being everything was still okay).

Perhaps, in that far-off day, as your hand reaches for your cigarettes, you will no longer remember what you wrote to me all those years ago. *You're a writer, Tom. You've got to tell our stories. The stuff we did, man, me and you and Jack. Do you*

*remember that time we found the leguaan in my car and it beat the crap out of you? Or the time we removed the back seat in our hunt for cigarette money? It's hard to believe somebody else will be driving that Ascona.*

And on that sunny Adelaide day, as you sit back on your bench, and JM gives a polite little cough, you will have no idea of how I replied.

*It never was your Ascona, Stef. You just drove her for a little while before handing the keys to somebody else. Just like that leguaan was never mine regardless of how hard it whacked me in the face. Just like this bloody country was never ours to begin with. We were just passing though. We thought up some pretty words, to be sure, but any word can be forgotten. We told some great stories, and even lived some of them, but stories, like history, can become obsolete.*

No, you will never know these words, for one Iowa morning, as dawn was breaking and ground squirrels were doing whatever it is that ground squirrels do, I highlighted a piece of text and pressed 'Delete'. I started over: *Cheer up, dawg. It's only Australia. And besides, we'll see one another in cyberspace.* Then I added a smiling face and committed my words to the void.